

JACK MARS

A LUKE STONE THRILLER--BOOK #5

PRESIDENT

A photograph of the United States Capitol building at dusk. The building is illuminated from within, with a warm yellow glow emanating from the windows and the large central dome. The sky is a deep, clear blue. The building's architecture is classical, with a prominent portico supported by columns. The dome is topped with a statue. The overall scene is a classic representation of the seat of the US government.

ELECT

A Luke Stone Thriller

Джек Марс

President Elect

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Марс Д.

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— (A Luke Stone Thriller)

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When China threatens to bankrupt the U.S. by calling in its debt, Americans are desperate for radical change. President Susan Hopkins, running for re-election, is floored as she watches the returns come in. Her rival—a madman senator from West Virginia who ran on the promise to nuke China’s islands out of the South China Sea—has, inconceivably, won. President Hopkins, though, knows she cannot yield power. To do so would be to spark World War III. She needs to prove the election was stolen, and to stop the looming war with China. With no one left to turn to, she summons Luke Stone, the former head of an elite FBI para-military team. The stakes could not be higher as she commands him to save America from its greatest threat: its own President Elect. Yet as one shocking twist follows another, it may, even for Luke Stone, be too late. A political thriller with non-stop action, dramatic international settings and heart-pounding suspense, PRESIDENT ELECT is book #5 in the bestselling and critically-acclaimed Luke Stone series, an explosive new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Jack Mars

President Elect

Jack Mars

Jack Mars is author of the bestselling LUKE STONE thriller series, which include the suspense thrillers ANY MEANS NECESSARY (book #1), OATH OF OFFICE (book #2), SITUATION ROOM (book #3), OPPOSE ANY FOE (book #4), PRESIDENT ELECT (book #5), and OUR SACRED HONOR (book #6).

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CHAPTER ONE

November 2

2:35 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

Near the Tidal Basin – Washington DC

“Okay,” the man said, his breath drifting away in plumes of white. “What are we doing here?” It was late, and the night was chilly with a light rain falling.

The man’s name was Patrick Norman, and he was talking to himself. He was an investigator, a man accustomed to spending long periods of time alone. Talking to himself was part of the job.

He stood on the concrete path along the water’s edge. There was no one else around. A moment ago, what looked like a homeless man had been sprawled under some newspapers on a bench about fifty yards away. Now that man was gone, and the newspapers were all over the wet ground.

From where Norman was, he could see the Lincoln Memorial far to his right. Directly in front of him and across the tidal basin was the dome of the Jefferson Memorial, lit up in shimmering blue and green. Lights glinted on the water.

Norman had been in this line of work a long time, and these were the kinds of meetings he relished. Late at night, in a secluded place, with someone who was hiding their identity – risky, but this exact type of thing had paid off for him in the past. If it hadn’t, he wouldn’t be here now.

A man slowly walked along the path toward him. The man was tall, wearing a long raincoat and a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his face. Norman watched the man approach.

Suddenly, there was movement behind him. Norman turned, and two more men were there. One of them was the homeless man from before. He was black, in ripped workpants and a heavy winter parka. The parka was wet and stained and dirty. The man’s hair stood up in odd tufts and curls on the very top of his head. The second man was just another nondescript nobody in a raincoat and hat. He had a bushy black mustache – if Norman had to describe him later that was the best he was going to do. He was too startled at the moment to absorb a lot of details.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” Norman said.

“Mr. Norman,” the tall man said from behind him. The man had a very deep voice. “I think I’m the one you want to speak with.”

Norman felt his shoulders sag. They were playing a game. If these men wanted to hurt him, they probably would have already done so. That relieved him a little – these were government people. Spooks. Spies. Intelligence operatives, they would probably call themselves. That also annoyed him a little. There was no mysterious source with information for him. These guys had dragged him out here in the middle of a rainy night to tell him... what?

They were wasting his time.

Norman turned around again to face the man. “And you are?”

The man shrugged. A smile showed just below the shadow from his hat. “It doesn’t matter who I am. It matters who I work for. And I can tell you my bosses are not pleased with the caliber of your work.”

“I’m the best there is,” Norman said. He said it without hesitating. He said it because he believed it. Much was open for debate. But one thing that was never called into question was the quality of the job he did.

“That’s what they believed, too, when they hired you. I think you’ll agree they’ve been patient. They’ve been paying you for a year with no results. But suddenly, all this time has passed, and it’s very late in the game. They’re forced to go in another direction, one they had hoped not to take. The election is five days from now.”

Norman shook his head. He raised his hands, palms upward, at his sides. “What can I tell you? They wanted me to find evidence of corruption, and I looked. There isn’t any. She may be many things,

but corrupt isn't one of them. She has no ties to her husband's business interests, formal or informal. Her husband no longer even manages the day-to-day affairs of his company, and the company has no government contracts, here or anywhere else. All of her premarital assets are managed in a blind trust, with no input from her – a measure she took when she first won a seat in the Senate fifteen years ago. There's no evidence of pay-offs of any kind, not even a hint or a rumor."

"So you failed to find anything?" the man said.

Norman nodded. "I failed to –"

"You failed, in other words."

A flicker of light appeared inside Norman's mind, something he hadn't considered because it had never been asked of him before.

"They wanted me to find something," he said. "Whether it was there or not."

The men around him said nothing.

"If that was the case, why didn't they just tell me so from the beginning? I would have told them to stuff it, and we never would have had this misunderstanding. If you want to invent bad news, don't hire an investigator. Hire a publicist."

The man just stared at him. His silence, and the silence of his two henchmen, was unnerving. Norman felt his heart begin to pick up the pace. His body trembled the slightest amount.

"Are you afraid, Mr. Norman?"

"Of you? Not a chance."

The man glanced at the two men behind Norman. They grabbed Norman without a word, each putting a painful armbar move on him, one on either side. They wrenched his arms backward behind his back and forced him to his knees. The wet grass instantly soaked through his pant legs.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey!"

Shouting was an old escape technique he had learned in a self-defense class many years before. It had come in handy a couple of times. When under attack, scream as loud as you possibly can. It startles the attacker, and often brings people running. No one expects it because regular people rarely raise their voices. Most victims never do. It was a painful truth – many people in this world had been mugged or raped or murdered because they were too polite to scream.

Norman gathered his air for the loudest shriek of his lifetime.

The man wrenched Norman's head upward by the hair and stuffed a rag in his mouth. It was a big rag, wet and dirty with oil or gasoline or some other noxious substance, and the man rammed it in there deep. It took the man several violent thrusts to push it all the way in. Norman couldn't believe how deep it went, and how it filled his entire mouth. His jaws opened as wide as they would go.

He couldn't force the rag back out. The foul smell of it, the taste, made Norman gag. His throat worked. If he vomited, he was going to choke to death.

"Guh!" Norman said. "Guh!"

The man slapped Norman across the side of his head.

"Shut up!" he hissed.

The man's hat had fallen from his head. Now Norman could see his fierce and dangerous blue eyes. They were eyes without pity. They were also without anger. Or humor. They betrayed no emotion of any kind. From inside his coat, he pulled a black gun. A second later, he pulled out a long silencer. Slowly, carefully, in no rush at all, he screwed the silencer onto the barrel of the gun.

"Do you know," he said, "what this gun will sound like when it goes off?"

"Guh!" Norman said. His whole body shook uncontrollably. His nervous system had gone haywire – so many messages flooding it at once, trying to move through the infrastructure, that he was frozen in place. All he could do was shake.

For the first time, Norman noticed that the man was wearing black leather gloves.

"It will sound like someone coughed. That's the way I usually think of it. Someone coughed, one time, and tried to do it quietly so as not to disturb anyone else."

The man pressed the gun to the left side of Norman's head.
"Good night, Mr. Norman. I'm sorry you didn't get the job done."

* * *

The man gazed down at what remained of Patrick Norman, former independent investigator. He had been a tall, thin man wearing a gray trench coat with a blue suit underneath. His head was ruined, the right side blown out in a large exit wound. Blood was pooling around the head on the wet grass and running onto the path. If the rain kept up, the blood would probably just wash away.

But the body?

The man handed the gun to one of his assistants, the one who had pretended to be homeless earlier this evening. The homeless man, also wearing gloves, crouched by the body and pressed the gun into the right palm of the dead man. Meticulously, he pressed each one of Norman's fingers onto the gun in various places. He dropped the gun about six inches from the body.

Then he stood and shook his head in sadness.

"A pity," he said in a Londoner accent. "Another suicide. I suppose he found his work stressful. So many setbacks. So many disappointments."

"Will the police believe it?"

The Englishman offered a ghost of a smile.

"Not a chance."

CHAPTER TWO

November 8

3:17 a.m. Alaska Time (7:17 a.m. Eastern Standard Time)

Slopes of Mount Denali

Denali National Park, Alaska

Luke Stone did not move at all.

He crouched perfectly still on a rooftop, behind a low stairwell outbuilding made of slapped together cement. The night was warm and heavy – hot enough that the sweat had soaked through his clothes. He breathed deeply, his nostrils flaring, but he did not make a sound. His heart beat inside his chest, slow but hard, like a fist pounding rhythmically on a door.

Boom-BOOM. Boom-BOOM. Boom-BOOM.

He peered around the corner of the outbuilding. Across the way, two bearded men waited with automatic rifles on their shoulders. They stood at the building's parapet, watching the harbor below them. They chatted quietly, laughing about something. One of them lit up a cigarette. Luke reached to his leg and slipped the serrated hunting knife away from the tape holding it to his calf.

As Luke watched, big Ed Newsam appeared, coming into view from the right, walking almost casually.

The big man approached the guards. Now they spotted him. Spotting Ed Newsam was an alarming proposition. Ed put his empty hands in the air, but continued to walk toward them. One of the men growled something in Arabic.

Luke burst around the edge, knife in hand. One second gone. He raced toward the men, his heavy footfalls crunching on the gravel roof. Three seconds, four.

The men heard him, turned to look.

Now Ed attacked, grabbing the closest man by the head, twisting it viciously to the right.

Luke hit his man chest high, knocking him to the rooftop. He landed on top and plunged his knife hard into the man's breastplate. It punched through on the first try. He clamped a hand over the man's mouth, feeling the bristles of the man's beard. He stabbed again and again, in and out, fast, like the piston of a machine.

The man struggled and squirmed, tried to push Luke off, but Luke slapped his hands away and kept jabbing. The knife made a liquid sound each time it penetrated.

The man's arms drifted down to his sides. His eyes were open, and he was still alive, but the fight had left him.

Finish. Finish it now.

Luke tilted the man's head up, free hand pressed hard against his mouth again, and swiped the serrated blade across the man's throat. A jet of blood pulsed out.

Done.

Luke kept his hand pressed against the mouth until the man was gone. He stared up at the black night sky, letting the life quietly ebb from his opponent.

"Look at your man," Ed's voice said. "Look!"

"I don't want to," Luke said. He just kept staring up at the sky, the great sweep of the Milky Way galaxy filling his vision. Millions of stars were visible. It was... he had no words for it. Beautiful was the only thing that came to mind. He wanted to gaze at those stars forever. He knew what he would see if he looked down – he had looked too many times already.

"You have to look, man," Ed said softly. "It's your job to look."

Luke shook his head. "No."

But there was no choice. He cast a glance at the body beneath him. The black beard of the jihadi was gone. The rugged face was replaced by the pretty features of a woman. The curly black hair was now long and soft and light brown.

Luke was covering the woman's mouth with his hands. Her dead blue eyes stared at him, unseeing – the eyes of his wife, Becca.

Ed whispered now. "You did it, man. You killed her good."

Luke snapped awake.

He sat bolt upright in the deep darkness, his heart hammering in his chest. He was nude, and his body was soaked in sweat. His hair was a long, matted tangle. His blond beard was as thick as that of any Islamic holy warrior. With his hair and his beard, and his weathered skin, he could easily pass for a homeless man.

He was wrapped in a mummy sleeping bag – rated for extreme cold, twenty degrees below zero. Outside his small tent, the wind howled – the tent's skirt flapped madly, a sound so loud he could barely hear the wind itself. He was alone above 16,000 feet on the western slope of Denali, and the mountain was already deep into its winter. A snowstorm had blown in two days ago, and hadn't stopped blowing.

He hadn't had a fire since the storm came in. He hadn't left the tent except to urinate in forty hours. He was 4,000 feet below the summit, and it looked like he wasn't going to make it there. Some people might say he wasn't going to make it anywhere.

He had come up here woefully unprepared – he realized that now. He had brought enough water for four days – it had run out two days ago. He was eating snow and ice for water at this point. That was okay. Worse was food. He had brought a stack of dried meals-ready-to-eat. They were mostly gone now. When the storm came, he had started rationing the food. He was eating less than half the daily calories he needed – luckily, he had barely moved in two days, and was conserving energy.

He hadn't bothered to bring a camp stove. He didn't have a radio, so he had no idea what the weather report was. He had choppered in with a private pilot, and hadn't filed an itinerary with the park service. No one had any idea he was out here but the pilot, and he had told the guy he would call him when he was done.

"Am I trying to kill myself?" he said out loud. He was startled by the sound of his own voice.

He knew the answer. No. Not necessarily. If it happened, okay, but he was not actively trying to die. You might say he was daring it to happen, taking foolish risks, and had been doing so ever since Becca died.

He wanted to live. He just wanted to be better at it. If he couldn't do that...

He was a failure as a husband. He was a failure as a father. His career was over at forty-one years of age – he had walked away from government work two years ago and hadn't looked for anything else. He hadn't checked his bank accounts in a while, but it was reasonable to assume that he was almost out of money. About the only thing he'd ever been any good at was surviving in harsh and unforgiving environments. And killing – he was good at that, too. Otherwise, he had been a total, abject failure.

He could die on this mountain, but the prospect of it held no terror for him.

He was blank, empty... numb.

"Gotta start thinking of a way out of here," he said, but he was just making conversation – he could leave, or not. It would be an okay place to die, and an easy thing to do. All he had to do was... nothing. Eventually – soon – he would run out of food. Drinking snowmelt wouldn't sustain him for long. He would become gradually weaker, until it was impossible for him to make it back down the mountain by himself. He would starve. At some point, he would drift off to sleep and never wake up.

How to decide? How to decide?

Abruptly, he shouted, unaware he was going to do it until he did.

"Give me a sign! Show me what to do!"

Just then, his phone did something it hadn't done in a long time – it rang. The sound made him jump, and his heart skipped a beat. The ringer was on as loud as it would go. The ring tone was a rock song that his son, Gunner, had put on the phone two years before. Luke had never changed it. More than not changing it, he had kept it on purpose. He cherished that song as the last link between them.

He looked at the phone. It reminded him of a living thing, a poisonous viper – you had to be careful how you handled it. He picked it up, glanced at the number, and answered it.

“Hello?”

The sound was garbled. Naturally, the thick tent was blocking the satellite signal. He was going to have to go outside to take this call – not a cheerful thought.

“I have to call you back!” he shouted into the handset.

Even moving quickly, it took several minutes to assemble the layers of clothes he needed and get dressed. It was too cold outside to do it halfway. He unzipped the tent, crawled through the tiny foyer, and pushed out into the weather. The wind and the stinging ice hit his face at once. He'd better make this quick.

He hung a beacon lamp on the tent frame and stumbled away from the noise of the flapping material into deep snow. He carried a powerful flashlight with him, turning back every few feet to mark the location of his camp. There were no lights out here, and visibility was about twenty yards. Snow and ice swirled around him.

He pressed the button to make the call and brought the phone inside the hood of his parka. He stood like a statue, listening to the beeps as the phone shook hands with the satellite and the call tried to go through.

“Stone?” a deep male voice said.

“Yes.”

“Hold for the President of the United States.”

It was a short wait.

“Luke?” a female voice said.

“Madam President,” Luke shouted. He couldn't help but smile when he did. “It's been a long time.”

“Much too long,” Susan Hopkins said.

“To what do I owe this honor?”

“I've got trouble,” she said. “I need you to come in.”

Luke thought about that for a moment. “Uh, I'm a long way from anywhere right now. It's going to be a little hard to – ”

“Doesn't matter,” she said. “Wherever you are, I'll send a plane. Or a helicopter. Whatever you need.”

“A big friendly Saint Bernard would be good for starters,” Luke said. “With one of those little whiskey kegs around his neck.”

“Done. He'll bring you a sandwich too, in case you're hungry.”

Luke nearly laughed. “Hungry is one way to describe it. And when I'm done eating, I really will need that chopper.”

“Also done. Before we hang up, I'll give you to someone who can take your coordinates and send someone out to get you. We go the extra mile around here. We believe in door-to-door service.”

Luke had to admit he felt a quick flash of relief. Just moments before he had seen no way off this mountain, no second chance at life. Now, he had one. He hadn't known before whether he'd wanted to die or live – but now he knew for sure. He could tell by the quickening of his blood when she mentioned a way out of here. Intellectually, he still didn't know, but viscerally, his body told him.

He wanted to live.

Despite all the hell he'd been through, somehow, he wanted to live.

“What's going on?” Luke said.

She hesitated, and her voice shook the smallest amount. He could hear it even through the wind whipping around him. “Yesterday was Election Day.”

Luke considered that. He had been off the grid for so long, he had no idea what the date was. Somewhere far away, in another world, people still campaigned for office. The wheels of government ground on. There were policies to argue about and important decisions to be made. There was media coverage, and talking heads shouting at each other. He hadn’t thought about any of these things in some time. In fact, he had almost forgotten they existed.

A long pause passed between them.

“Luke,” Susan said. “I lost the election.”

CHAPTER THREE

8:03 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

The Oval Office

The White House, Washington DC

“That evil bastard,” someone in the room said. “He stole it, plain and simple.”

Susan Hopkins stood in the middle of the office and stared at the large flat-panel TV on the wall. She was still numb, almost in shock. Although she watched intently, she was having trouble forming clear thoughts. It was too much to process.

She was very aware of the suit she wore. It was dark blue with a white dress shirt. There was something uncomfortable about it. Once upon a time, it had fit well – in fact, had been tailored to fit her perfectly – but it was clear today that her body was changing. Now the suit hung wrong. The shoulders of the jacket were too loose, the slacks were too tight. Her bra straps pinched the flesh of her back.

Too much late-night food. Too little sleep. Too little exercise.

She sighed heavily. The job was killing her anyway.

Yesterday at this same time, just after the polls opened, she was among the first people in the United States to cast her vote. She had come out of the booth with a big smile on her face and a fist in the air – an image that had been caught by the TV cameras and photographers, and had gone viral all day long. She had ridden a wave of optimism into Election Day, and the polls yesterday morning pegged her support at more than sixty percent of likely voters – a possible landslide in the making.

Now *this*.

As she watched, her opponent, Jefferson Monroe, took the podium at his headquarters in Wheeling, West Virginia. Although it was eight in the morning, a crowd of campaign workers and supporters were still there. Everywhere the cameras panned in the crowd were tall, red, white, and blue, Abraham Lincoln–style hats – they had somehow become the emblem of Monroe’s campaign. That, and the aggressive signs that had become his campaign’s war cry: AMERICA IS OURS!

Ours? What did that mean? As opposed to who? Who else would it belong to?

It seemed clear: minorities, non-Christians, gay people... you name it. In particular, it was clear it meant Chinese immigrants to America, as well as Chinese-Americans. Just weeks before, the Chinese had threatened to call in their debt and potentially bankrupt the US. This, indeed, had allowed Monroe to ride a wave of Chinese fear in the final days of his election. Monroe thrived on fear – Chinese fear in particular. According to Monroe, these people were acting as a secret cat’s paw for the imperialist ambitions of the government in Beijing, and the Chinese oligarchs who were buying up vast swaths of American real estate and business interests. According to Monroe, if we didn’t get tough, the Chinese would take over America.

His people ate it up.

Jefferson Monroe’s archenemies, and the enemies of his supporters, were the Chinese. The Chinese were America’s great nemesis, and the airhead former fashion model in the White House either didn’t have the eyes to see it, or was a bought and sold Chinese collaborator.

Monroe himself stared out at the crowd with his deep-set, steely eyes. He was seventy-four years old, white-haired, with a lined and weathered face – a face that seemed much older than its years. Judging by his face alone, he could have been a hundred years old, or a thousand. But he was tall, and stood erect. By all accounts he slept three or four hours a night, and that was all he needed.

He wore a freshly starched white dress shirt open at the throat with no tie – another signature of his. He was a billionaire, or close to it, but he was a man of the people, by God! A man who had come from nothing. Dirt poor, from the mountains of West Virginia. A man who, despite his newfound wealth, despised the rich all his life. A man who, more than anything, despised the liberals,

especially Northeasterners, and New Yorkers in particular. No fancy pants, Washington, DC insider suit and power tie for him. He somehow managed to conveniently overlook that he himself was the ultimate Washington insider, that he had spent twenty-four years in the United States Senate.

Susan supposed there was some modicum of truth to his affect. He'd had a hardscrabble upbringing in Appalachia – that was common knowledge. And he had clawed his way up and out from there. But he was no friend of the common man, or woman. To orchestrate his climb, he had always, from his earliest days – aligned himself with the most backward elements in American society. He had been a Pinkerton thug as a young man, attacking striking coal miners with clubs and ax handles. He had spent his entire career in the back pocket of the major coal interests, always fighting for less regulation, less workplace safety, and fewer workers' rights. And he had been rewarded handsomely for his efforts.

“I told you,” he said into the microphone.

The crowd erupted into raucous cheers.

Monroe tamped it down with a hand. “I told you we were going to take America back.” The cheering started again. “You and me!” Monroe shouted. “We did it!”

Now the cheering changed, gradually morphing into a chant, one with which Susan was all too familiar. It had a funny awkward sort of cadence, this chant, like a waltz, or some kind of call-and-response.

“AMERICA! IS OURS! AMERICA! IS OURS! AMERICA! IS OURS!”

It went on and on. The sound of it made Susan sick to her stomach. At least they hadn't started in on the “Kick Her Out!” chants that had become popular for a while. The first time she had heard it, it nearly brought her to tears. She knew a lot of the people involved were probably just showboating. But at least some of these lunatics really did want to hang her, supposedly because she was a traitor in league with the Chinese. The thought of it left a hollow place inside of her.

“No more empty factories!” Monroe shouted. Now it was his turn to raise a triumphant fist in the air. “No more crime-ridden cities! No more human filth! No more Chinese betrayals!”

“NO MORE!” the crowd answered in unison, another of their favorite chants. “NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE!”

Kurt Kimball, crisp, alert, big and strong as always, with a perfectly bald head, stepped in front of the TV and used the remote control to mute the sound.

It was as if a spell had been broken. Suddenly Susan was completely aware of her surroundings again. She was here in the sitting area of the Oval Office with Kurt, his close aide Amy, Kat Lopez, Secretary of Defense Haley Lawrence, and a few others. These were some of Susan's most trusted advisors.

On a closed-circuit video monitor, Susan's Vice President, Marybeth Horning, was attending. After the Mount Weather disaster, security protocols had changed. Marybeth and Susan were never supposed to be in the same place at the same time. And that was a shame.

Marybeth was a hero of Susan's. She was the ultra-liberal former senator from Rhode Island who had lectured at Brown University for more than two decades. She seemed mousy and frail, with a bob of gray hair and round-rimmed granny glasses.

But looks, in this case, were deceiving. She was also a thunderous firebrand for workers' rights, women's rights, the rights of gay people, and the environment. She was the mastermind of the successful healthcare initiative Susan's administration had launched. Marybeth was at once an unassuming genius, a student of history, and a vicious political infighter with sharp elbows.

Another sad thing: Marybeth lived in Susan's old house on the grounds of the Naval Observatory. The house was one of Susan's favorite places on Earth. It would be nice to go there once in a while.

“This is a problem,” Kurt Kimball said, gesturing at the silent TV.

Susan nearly laughed. “Kurt, I've always admired your gift for understatement.”

Jefferson Monroe had made a campaign promise – a promise! – that he would go to Congress and seek a Declaration of War against China on his first official day in office. In fact, and most people had trouble taking this seriously, he had implied that the American military's first move would be tactical nuclear strikes against China's artificial islands in the South China Sea. He had also promised that he would erect security walls around Chinatowns in New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. He said he would demand the Canadians do the same in Vancouver and Calgary.

The Canadians, quite naturally, had balked at the idea.

"The country has gone insane," Kurt said. "And Monroe is expected to call for your concession speech again, Susan."

Kat Lopez shook her head. As Susan's chief-of-staff, Kat had matured and come into her own these past couple of years. She had also aged about ten years. When she came in, she had been a surreally beautiful and youthful thirty-seven – now she looked every minute of thirty-nine, and then some. Lines had appeared on her face, gray was invading the jet black of her hair.

"I advise you not to do that, Susan," she said. "We have evidence of widespread minority voter suppression in five Southern states. We have the suspicion of outright polling machine fraud in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. The counts are still too close to call in many places – just because the TV stations have called these states for him, doesn't mean we have to. We can make this thing drag out for weeks, if not months."

"And cause a presidential succession crisis," Kurt said.

"We can weather it," Kat said. "We've seen worse. The inauguration isn't until January twentieth. If it takes that long, so be it. It buys us time. If there was fraud, our analysts will discover it. If there was voter suppression like we think, there will be lawsuits. In the meantime, we're still governing."

"I'm with Kat on this," Marybeth chimed in through the monitor. "I say we fight until we drop."

Susan looked at Haley Lawrence. He was tall and heavysset, with unkempt blond hair. His suit was so wrinkled it was almost as if he had passed out in it. He looked like he had just awoken ten minutes ago from a fitful sleep full of nightmares. Except for their shared height, he and Kurt Kimball were near opposites in appearance.

"Haley, you're the only Republican in this room," Susan said. "Monroe's in your party. I want your thoughts on this before I decide anything."

Lawrence took a long moment before answering. "I don't think that Jefferson Monroe is really a Republican. His ideas are far more radical than conservative. He surrounds himself with gangs of young thugs. He spent the past year appealing to the most backward and basest notions of angry and resentful people. He is a danger to world peace, the social order, and the very ideals that this country was founded upon."

Haley took a long breath. "I would hate to see him and his ilk occupy this office and this building, even if it turns out that he really did win. If I were you, I would obstruct him as long as possible."

Susan nodded. It was what she wanted to hear. It was time to gear up for battle. "All right. I won't concede. We're not going anywhere."

Kurt Kimball raised a hand. "Susan, I'll go along with whatever you want to do, as long as you realize the potential consequences of these actions."

"Which are?"

He began to tick them off on his fingers, in what seemed like no particular order, as if he were ready to describe each one as it occurred to him.

"By not voluntarily surrendering the seat, you are breaking with a two-century tradition. You will be called a traitor, a usurper, a would-be dictator, and probably worse. You will be breaking the law, and you could eventually be brought up on charges. If no evidence of election fraud arises, then

you will look vain and foolish. You could hurt your place in the history books – at this moment, you have a sterling legacy.”

Now Susan raised her hand.

“Kurt, I understand the consequences,” she said, and took a deep breath.

“And I say bring them on.”

CHAPTER FOUR

November 11

4:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

Mount Carmel Cemetery

Reston, Virginia

A single red rose, just cut, lay on the brown grass. Luke stared at the name and the epitaph carved into the gleaming black marble.

REBECCA ST. JOHN

To Live, to Laugh, to Love

The bleak overcast day was already fading and night was coming on. He felt a shiver go through him. He was overtired from the long trip back east. He was also clean-shaven, with short hair – no longer protected from the chill by his shaggy mane. He looked away from the stone and stared out at the cemetery, row upon row of gravestones covering rolling hillsides in a quiet part of suburban DC.

He gazed up at the gunmetal sky. When they married, Becca had taken his last name. Apparently, she had chosen to go to her grave under her maiden name. That burned him, all the way deep inside. Their rupture had been complete. He almost shook his fist at the sky, at Becca, wherever she might be now.

Did he hate her? No. But she made him very, very angry. She had blamed him for everything that went wrong in their marriage, right up to and including her own death from cancer.

On the cemetery road, just down the hill and about a hundred yards away, a sleek black limousine pulled up in front of Luke's nondescript rental sedan. As he watched, a chauffeur in black jacket and cap opened the back door of the limo.

Two figures emerged. One was young and male, growing tall like his father. The boy wore jeans, sneakers, a dress shirt, and a windbreaker jacket. The other figure was old and female, stooped a bit, wearing a long heavy wool coat against the damp autumn air. Luke didn't have to guess who they were – he already knew.

Luke had cheated. Of course he had. Fifteen minutes ago, he had been tailing that same limousine. When he guessed where it was going, he decided to beat it here. The two people working their way slowly up the footpath now, arm in arm, were Audrey, Becca's seventy-two-year-old mother, and Gunner, Luke and Becca's thirteen-year-old son.

Luke looked away for a moment as they approached, scanning the horizon as though something interested him out there. When he turned back again, they were nearly here. He watched them come. Audrey moved slowly, carefully studying her own feet as they touched the ground – she seemed older than her years. Gunner stepped awkwardly along with her, supporting her. The slow pace seemed like it would make him lose his balance – he was like a young colt trapped in a stall, all frustrated energy, desperate to unleash his own speed and power.

Gunner stared quizzically at Luke, but only for a few seconds. It had been nearly two years since last they'd met – an immense amount of time at the boy's age – and for a brief moment, it was clear he didn't know who Luke was. His face darkened when he realized he was staring at his own father. Then he looked at the ground.

Audrey knew who Luke was right away.

"Can we help you?" she said before they even reached the grave marker.

"*You* can't," Luke said. Audrey and her husband, Lance, had never accepted him as their son-in-law. They had been a toxic influence on his marriage since well before he and Becca exchanged their vows. Luke had nothing to say to Audrey.

"What are you doing here, Dad?" Gunner said. His voice was deeper now. His throat had the cleft of an Adam's apple – that hadn't been there before.

“I was called here by the President. But I wanted to see you first.”

“Your President lost,” Audrey said. “She’s holed up inside the White House like a lunatic, refusing to admit defeat. I always knew there was something suspect about her. Now it’s on full display for the world to see. Was she hoping to become Emperor?”

Luke looked at Audrey, taking his time, soaking her in. She had deep-set eyes with irises so dark, they seemed almost black. She had a sharp nose, like a beak. Her shoulders were hunched, and her hands were impossibly frail. She reminded him of a bird – a crow, or maybe a vulture. A carrion eater, in any case.

“She lost,” Audrey said again. “She needs to get over it and prepare to hand over power to the winner.”

“Gunner?” Luke said, ignoring Audrey now. “Can we talk?”

“I told Rebecca in no uncertain terms not to marry you. I told her it would end in disaster. But I never could have imagined that it would come to this.”

“Gunner?” Luke repeated, but now the boy was looking away. Luke saw a tear slide down Gunner’s face. The kid swallowed hard.

“I just want to apologize.”

The words came out wrong. An apology? That wouldn’t nearly cut it. Luke knew that. It was going to take a lot more than an apology to set this situation right again, if that was even possible. He wanted to tell Gunner that. He wanted to tell him he would do anything, everything, if only he would let him back into his life.

He had made a terrible mistake. He would spend the rest of his life on this. He would fix it.

Gunner looked at him, openly crying now. The tears streamed down his face. “I don’t want to talk to you.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to see you. I just want to forget about you, don’t you understand?”

Luke nodded. “Okay. Okay, I can respect that. But know that I love you and I’m always open to hearing from you. Do you still have my number? You can call me if you change your mind.”

“I don’t have your number,” Gunner said. “And I won’t change my mind.”

Luke nodded again. “In that case, I’ll leave you alone.”

Audrey’s voice followed Luke down the path. “That sounds like a good idea,” she said. “Leave the boy alone.” Then she laughed, a mad cackle that would have sounded almost like a coughing fit if Luke didn’t know better.

“Leave us alone with our dead.”

Luke made it to his car, put it in gear, and was almost to the cemetery gates before he started crying himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

4:57 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

Bubba's Lounge

Chester, Pennsylvania

No one remembered who Bubba was.

The small tavern had sat there on a street corner in the southeast end of Chester, near the river, since sometime after World War II. Ten different people had owned it at one time or another, and it had always been called Bubba's, as far as anyone knew. But no one knew why.

"I guess she's going to throw in the towel," one man at the bar said.

"About time," said another.

Marc Reeves was working the stick today. Marc was an old-timer, sixty-seven years of age. He had poured beer at this bar, off and on, for the past twenty-five years, outlasting three owners in the process. He had watched the whole town go down the tubes right from this bar. In a city where damn near everything was boarded up or about to be, Bubba's was a success story. Even so, nobody kept it for long.

The place broke even – that was the problem. It didn't lose money, it didn't make money. You were better off working there, or drinking there, than owning it. At least you got something for your trouble.

There was a big old box color TV set mounted on an iron rod behind the bar. This time of the afternoon, the place had four or five daytime drinkers lined up along the rail, wasting their Social Security checks and whatever was left of their livers. Usually the television was set to whatever game happened to be on. Today was different, though. Today the President was holding her first press conference since she lost the election.

Marc had been skeptical of her when she first came into office, especially considering the circumstances, but she had grown on him. He thought she had done a pretty good job, all in all. She, and the country, had weathered a lot of storms. So he had done something yesterday that he rarely did – he had voted for her. He hadn't stepped inside a polling place in twelve years before that.

Not everyone agreed with his decision.

"I like the new guy," a fat man along the rail said. Everybody called him Skipper. He'd probably never been on a boat in his life. "What has Susan Hopkins ever done for Chester, Pennsylvania? That's what I want to know. Anyway, it's about time somebody put a stop to all these Chinamen flooding the country."

"And bring back our jobs while you're at it," a man named Steve-O said. Steve-O was so thin he was like one of those man-like pipe cleaner sculptures. He came in here and drank beer and bourbon every single day. Marc had never seen Steve-O eat even a bite of food. He seemed to survive on alcohol alone.

Marc was drying pint glasses that had just come out of the washer. "Steve-O, you've been on disability for twenty years."

"I don't mean bring *my* job back," Steve-O said.

A few people laughed.

On the TV, an empty podium appeared. It was flanked by American flags.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a hushed voice said, "the President of the United States."

Susan Hopkins walked onto the stage from the right. She wore a tan pantsuit, her hair in a short blonde bob. Beautiful. Marc remembered her from her modeling days, in particular a certain *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue from twenty-five years ago. He had been middle-aged then, married with kids. There was something heartbreaking about her photo shoot – she was ethereal, unattainable,

from another world. He didn't have the words for what she was. And if anything, she looked even better now – more down to Earth, more mature. Marc liked a woman with a little mileage on her.

“Take it off, baby!” Steve-O said, eliciting some giggles from the others.

Marc had served Steve-O six shots and six beers in the past couple of hours. He'd say Steve-O was visibly intoxicated by now. And he was starting to pluck Marc's nerves. “You're about to get cut off, Steve-O.”

Steve-O looked at him. “What?”

“Shut up or go home. That's what I'm saying.”

Marc turned back to the TV screen. Hopkins still hadn't said anything yet. She seemed to be choking back some emotion. This was it, then. She was going to concede the election. She had seemed popular, but in the end she had been a one-term President – and not even a full term.

“My fellow Americans,” she said.

The bar was silent. The room where she spoke was almost silent – Marc could hear the whirr and click of cameras taking photos.

“I'm going to keep my remarks brief. This was a hard-fought campaign between two very different visions of America. One vision is of optimism, understanding, and pride for what we've accomplished as a nation. The other is a dark vision of anger, despair, resentment, and even paranoia. It sees our nation as a ruined landscape, which can only be saved by the efforts of one man. And it promises violence – violence against our most important trading partner, as well as violence against our own communities, our neighbors, and our friends.

“I'm sure you know which vision I embrace. I cannot accept a worldview based on racism, prejudice, and mistrust. And yet, despite my misgivings, under normal circumstances my task now would be to congratulate the apparent victor in this race, and welcome the President-elect, graciously preparing for the peaceful transfer of power that is a hallmark of our democracy.”

She paused. “But these are not normal circumstances.”

Marc stood up straight. He felt a tingle along his spine. He looked along the bar at the men lined up. Every single one of them was glued to the television now. Every one of them was suddenly alert, like animals before an approaching thunderstorm. What was she saying?

“My campaign has discovered evidence of Election Day irregularities in at least five states, including voter suppression, but also including outright tampering with and potential hacking of election machinery. We have reason to believe that the election was stolen, not just from our campaign, but from the American people. We have already contacted the FBI and the Justice Department about our concerns, and we look forward to a full, impartial investigation. Until such an investigation is completed – however long it takes – I cannot and will not recognize the results of this election, and I will continue to perform the duties of the President of the United States, carrying out my oath to protect and uphold the Constitution. Thank you.”

On the TV, President Hopkins moved to the right and off screen. There was a babble of voices as reporters shouted, competing with each other for her attention. Flashbulbs popped. The TV station switched to a different camera, one focused on the President as she was hustled out a side door behind a sea of very large Secret Service agents. She hadn't taken a single question.

“What does that mean?” Steve-O said. “Can she do that?”

No one said a word.

Marc just kept drying pint glasses. He didn't know the answer to that himself.

CHAPTER SIX

5:48 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

34th Floor

The Willard Intercontinental Hotel, Washington DC

“Are we a nation of laws?” the man shouted into the telephone.

He sat with his feet up on his wide desk of polished oak, gazing out the floor-to-ceiling window at the lights of the Capitol. It was dark out – the sun set early this time of year.

“That’s what I want to know. Because if we are a nation of laws, then that woman, the current occupant of the White House, needs to start packing her bags. She lost, and Jefferson Monroe won. Jefferson Monroe is the President-elect of the United States. And come inauguration day, if the current occupant is not out, we are going to evict her, like the sheriff evicting a deadbeat tenant.”

For a few seconds, the man paused, listening to the reporter on the other end of the line.

“Oh yeah, you can quote me. Print every word of it.”

He hung up the phone and slid it onto the desk. He checked his watch and breathed deeply. He had been on the phones with reporters for nearly an hour, ever since Susan Hopkins had run off the stage and darted out of the room at the end of her silly press conference.

The man’s name was Gerry O’Brien. At age fifty, he was very tall and rail thin. He was balding, and his face was all angles and jutting cliffs. He weighed the same as he had the day he graduated from college. He was a marathoner, a triathlete, and in recent years, he had gotten into doing mud runs and survival runs. Anything hard, anything tough, anything extreme where people dropped over sideways, or puked up their guts, or fell down a hill and tore open their knees, it had his name on it.

The son of Irish immigrants, he had come up on the streets of Woodside, Queens. His father was a prison guard. His mother was a maid. Hard people, and they raised him to be hard. You wanted to grow up in Woodside, you had to fight. Okay? He didn’t mind. He’d go toe to toe with anybody. He was so fierce, so remorseless, that kids in the neighborhood called him the Shark.

He was the first person in his family to go to college, and then – uncharted territory – law school. He made his first million before he was thirty, chasing ambulances – personal injury law.

He’d gotten a photo taken of himself looking very angry (and few people had the ability to look as angry as he could) and paid for small poster advertisements placed throughout the subway system.

Injured? You need somebody tough to stand up for your rights. A real lawyer. A real New Yorker. You need Gerry O’Brien. You need the Shark.

Almost instantly, he became Gerry the Shark. Everyone who rode the trains in the five boroughs knew the name. He used to ride the subways himself just to look at his own ads – and he hated the subways.

The more he made, the more ads he could afford. And the more ads he ran, the more he made. Soon he was running ads on late-night TV, then mid-afternoon TV. It was a jackpot. He had three lawyers working for him, then five, then ten. Then twenty. By the time he sold the business ten years ago, he had thirty-three lawyers and more than a hundred support staff.

He retired for a few years. Wandered. Drifted. Traveled the world. Did too many drugs. Drank too much. Did too much... of everything. Getting into radical right-wing politics probably saved his life. He had swapped out all the bad stuff for personal discipline and a vision of America that he discovered he shared with a lot of people – a return to an earlier, simpler time.

A time when the supremacy of white people wasn’t questioned. A time when marriage was between a man and a woman. A time when a young guy could walk out of high school at eighteen, walk into a factory job, and spend the rest of his working life there, making all the money he needed to support his family.

There was more to it, of course, a lot more. Darker things, things you needed a strong stomach for, things that were not for wider consumption. He had big plans. They were going to clean this country up, once and for all. But that wasn't something you put right out there in public, was it? Not yet.

Gerry the Shark got up from his desk and moved through the suite of rooms. A few secretaries were here, but mostly people worked out of other places. Gerry was here not only because he was the head strategist, but also because he was the body man to the chief – he didn't like to let the old man out of his sight.

They had flown up here from Louisville this afternoon. His boss owned this... what would you call it? An apartment? Sure, an apartment with ten bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, and half a dozen offices with a conference room and a staff dining area. It took up an entire floor in one of the most storied and most expensive hotels in the world. This hotel was where American history happened. This was where John F. Kennedy took his many afternoon trysts. This was the place.

They would spend the night here. They had important business here in DC early tomorrow morning.

Gerry breezed down a hallway, slapped his key card against a sensor, and passed into the living quarters. The front sitting room was furnished in opulent old-world style, like the drawing room in a Victorian mansion.

A man with white hair stood at a tall window, the curtains pulled aside. He stared out at the night. The man wore a three-piece suit despite the fact that he was home and had no intention of going out. The open-throated dress shirts were a shuck, of course. The man liked to play dress-up as much as anyone.

He held a martini in his hand. The martini glass looked tiny. The hands were the thing – despite the man's elegant dress, and his obvious wealth, he had the big gnarled hands of someone who had grown up doing manual labor, and lots of it. The hands said: *What's wrong with this picture?*

It was a raw night in the nation's capital, and the wind howled outside the window, just a little bit. The old man stared out at the backdrop of the great urban sprawl and the lights of the city. Gerry knew that even after all these decades the country boy inside the old man was dazzled by city lights.

"How goes the war?" Jefferson Monroe, President-elect of the United States, said in his soft Southern lilt.

"Beautiful," Gerry said, and he meant it. "She's on the ropes and she doesn't know what to do. Her statement today makes that clear. She's not going to vacate the Presidency? It plays right into our hands. She's isolating herself – public opinion is going to go our way. If we play it right, we might be able to get her out of there sooner rather than later. I think we want to ramp up the pressure – get her to hand over the Presidency early, long before any voter fraud investigation concludes. Then we cancel the investigation ourselves."

The old man turned from the tall window. "Is there any precedent for a President handing over power early?"

Gerry the Shark shook his head. "No."

"Then how do we do it?"

Now Gerry smiled. "I have a few ideas."

CHAPTER SEVEN

6:47 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

The Oval Office

The White House, Washington DC

She was alone when they showed Luke into the room.

For a moment, he thought she might be asleep. She sat in the sitting area, slumped in one of the armchairs. She looked like a broken rag doll, or a high school kid showing contempt for the teacher by slouching.

The new Resolute Desk loomed behind her. The heavy drapes were pulled, blocking the tall windows. On the floor, around the edge of the oval carpet, there was an inscription printed:

The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself – Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The words went all the way around the carpet, finishing right where they began.

She wore blue slacks and a white dress shirt. Her jacket was hung on the back of one of the chairs. Her shoes were off and lying askew on the carpet.

Despite her posture, her eyes were sharp and alive. They watched him.

“Hi, Susan,” he said.

“Did you watch my press conference?” she said.

He shook his head. “I stopped watching TV over a year ago. I feel a lot better since I did. You should try it.”

“I told the American people I’m not going to step down.”

Luke nearly laughed. “I bet that’s going over well. What happened? You like the job so much you don’t want to give it up? I’m pretty sure it doesn’t work that way.”

A small smile appeared on her face. The smile, barely there, reminded him of why she had once been a supermodel. She was beautiful. Her smile could light up a room. It could light up the sky.

“They stole the election.”

“Of course they did,” he said. “Now you’re going to steal it back. That sounds like a plan.” He paused. Then he told her what he honestly thought. “Listen, I think you’re better off without this job. Now they won’t have Susan Hopkins to kick around anymore. Let them find out how bad it is without you. They’ll beg you to come back.”

She shook her head, the smile growing brighter. “I don’t think it works like that.”

“I don’t think so either,” he said.

She shook her head. A long exhale escaped from her.

“Where have you been, Luke Stone? You should have stuck around. We had a lot of fun in here, once the chaos died down a little. We did a lot of good. And you were going to teach me to shoot guns once upon a time. Remember?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. You wanted to shoot the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I remember. But I haven’t fired a gun in nine months. I was going to the range once in a while, trying to keep my skills up. Then I decided why bother? I don’t want to shoot anyone. And even if one day I have to, I feel pretty sure it’ll come back to me.”

“Just like riding a bicycle?” she said.

He smiled. “Or falling off of one.”

She sat up and indicated the chair across from her. “You really don’t know what’s going on?”

Luke settled down in the chair. It was an upright chair, neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. “I heard a few rumblings in the distance. The new guy is hard right. He doesn’t like the Chinese. He’s going to bring the manufacturing jobs back. Not sure how he’s going to do that – fire all the robots? Either way, if that’s what people want...”

“Ignorance is bliss, I guess,” Susan said.

“Not exactly bliss, but – ”

“The man’s a fascist,” she said. “He’s a billionaire, a robber baron, who has funded white supremacist groups for decades, apparently even when he was in the Senate. He plans to go to war with China on his first day in office, possibly with tactical nuclear strikes, although I’m not sure how many people really believe that. He wants to build security fences and walls around Chinatowns in American cities. His remarks suggest hatred for minorities, gay people, disabled people, anyone who disagrees with him, as well as contempt for the independence of the judicial branch of government.”

Luke wasn’t sure what to think about all that. He had been out of the loop for a long time. He trusted Susan, and he could tell that she believed what she was saying. But he had trouble believing it himself. He had served in the military under conservative Presidents, and on the Special Response Team under liberal Presidents. Yes, they were different from one another, but radically different? White supremacy, security fences around minority enclaves different? No. Not really. No matter who was in charge, there was always something you might call the American Way.

“And you’re saying that people voted for this?”

She shook her head, emphatically now. “We believe that there was widespread voter fraud and voter suppression in at least five states, all of them swing states. That’s why I say they stole the election.”

Luke was beginning to see the puzzle, but there were pieces missing. “You want me to investigate this?” he said. “Is that why you called me back here? It seems like there would be a hundred other – ”

“No,” she said. “You’re right. There are a hundred other people. We’ve got data analysts looking at the voting machines. We’ve got investigators out interviewing people about voter suppression, especially in black districts across the rural South. And circumstantially, anecdotally, the evidence is already pretty strong. We really don’t need you for the investigation.”

He was confused by her reply, and maybe a little annoyed. He had been alone, high in the mountains, working on his own issues. Challenging himself. Challenging God to kill him. Maybe even finding some clarity.

Now he was back in Washington, DC, getting yelled at by his son and smirked at by his former mother-in-law. He was sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic and undergoing security checks. He had shaved his beard off and gotten his hair cut. He was back among regular humans and their interests and their worries. When he was a soldier in combat, they used to call it “back in the world” – a place he really didn’t want to be.

“So what am I doing here?” he said.

“I’m not sure yet,” she said. “But I know I need you. I did something unprecedented by refusing to hand over power. It’s never been done before in American history. Things could get hot around here very quickly, and I don’t have many people in my administration that I trust. I mean completely, one hundred percent, without a doubt. A few, yes, but no more than that.”

She pointed at him. “And you. Early in my tenure as President, you saved this country again and again. You saved my life. You saved my daughter. You might have saved the world from a nuclear war. Then you disappeared just when things got good. I’ve never met a man like you, Luke. You’re built for bad weather, to put it mildly. And it feels to me like a storm is brewing.”

Built for bad weather.

He had never heard it put quite that way before. But of course it was true – she had him pegged, better than Becca ever had. Better than he had ever pegged himself. Not only was he built for it, it was what he lived for. When the weather was nice, he grew bored. He wandered off. He went and looked for a hurricane to get lost in.

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Stay close. Live in the White House Residence for the time being. We can give you an official title – personal bodyguard. Intelligence strategist. It’s a little funny, but that doesn’t matter. Chuck

Berg is still head of the Secret Service home security detail. He knows you and respects you. There are plenty of rooms to stay in. You can have the Lincoln Bedroom if you want. We've had a few celebrities stay in there. The singer from the rock band Zero Hour and his wife slept over just a few weeks ago. Nice people – the guy's nothing like his stage persona. He's been doing a lot of charity work in Africa, paying for water filtration systems and so forth."

She stopped for a breath before going on. "Obviously, the White House was completely rebuilt two years ago, so Lincoln himself never really slept in the new Lincoln Bedroom, but..."

It seemed to Luke that she was babbling now. She was like a little girl trying to explain something important to an adult, without ever saying what it was.

"You want a security blanket," he said. "That's why I'm here."

She nodded. "Yes. I had one when I was a child. It was soft and had a friendly dinosaur image woven into it, which over time faded away to a green blur. I called it Little Cover. God, I miss that thing."

Now Luke did laugh. It came out like the sudden barking of a dog. It felt good to laugh. He couldn't remember the last time it had happened.

"Little Cover, huh?"

"That's right. Little Cover."

Was there something more to what she was asking him? He couldn't tell. Heck, the White House Residence? That had to be an upgrade from the room at the Marriott they'd given him last night.

"Okay," he said. "I'll do it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

8:26 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

South of Canal Street

Chinatown, New York City

“Okay,” Kyle Meiner barked. “We’re about to hit them. So listen up!”

Kyle crouched in the back of a long black cargo van as it bounced over the potholes and ruts of the city streets. He looked at his men – eight big guys, cramped together. Everybody in here was muscled up, a gym rat. There wasn’t a man in here who couldn’t bench press 225, or squat 300. Everybody was pounding at least creatine, and some of the boys were juicing steroids, human growth hormone, in a few cases more exotic stuff – these were serious dudes. Every one of them had a crew cut or a shaved head.

Kyle’s body was like theirs, only bigger, if that was possible. His arms were like pythons, his legs like tree stumps. Veins popped out on his biceps, along his neck, his forehead, his chest, everywhere. Kyle was into veins.

Veins meant blood flow. Veins meant power.

There were five other vans just like this one in the convoy, and that told Kyle they were about to put forty or fifty hardcore, no-nonsense activists on the streets. Tight, long-sleeved T-shirts clung to muscular chests and torsos – each shirt black with the words GATHERING STORM in white. The letters looked vaguely like human bones, and had splatters of what looked like bright red blood along the bottom.

Hard eyes stared back at Kyle. These men were the sharpened point of the spear.

“I don’t want to see any weapons out there,” Kyle said. “No knives, no clubs, God help you if I see a gun. Brass knuckles. If you have anything on you, you are leaving it in the van. Got me?”

A few guys grumbled and muttered.

“What? I don’t hear you.”

The grumbles were louder this time.

“This is a rally and a march, boys. It’s not a street fight. If the slopes make it a fight, okay. Defend yourselves and each other. Throw the little commies through a brick wall for all I care. Just know that when the cops come and they find you armed, that’s a felony. We have lawyers on speed dial, ready to go, but if you get busted for possession of a weapon, you are not getting out tonight, and maybe not for a long time. I need to hear you on this. I don’t want to see anybody put away. It’s bad for you, and it’s a bad look for the organization. Got it? Come on!”

“Got it!” someone shouted.

“Yo!”

“We got it, man.”

Kyle smiled. “Good. Now let’s go kick some ass.”

The signs were piled in the back. Most of them said *America Is Ours!* One of them said *Chinks Go Home!* That was Kyle’s sign. If his men were the sharpened point, he was the drop of poison at the very tip.

He was twenty-nine years old, and had been an organizer with Gathering Storm for just over two years. It was his dream job. Where did he find his recruits? Weight rooms, almost exclusively. Gold’s Gym. Planet Fitness. YMCA. Places where big strong guys hung out, guys who’d had just about enough. Enough censorship. Enough of the thought police. Enough of the good jobs going overseas. Enough of the race mixing.

Enough of the religion of multiculturalism being rammed down their throats.

If someone had told Kyle five years ago that he was going to pull together groups of men – the best, the toughest, the most aggressive young white men he could find – and that they were going

to put the fear of the Lord into the people dragging this country down... that they were going to restore America to greatness... and that he was going to *get paid* to do this? Well, Kyle would have said that person was an idiot.

Yet here he was.

And here were his boys.

And their man had just been elected President of the United States.

There was nothing but daylight up ahead, and they were going to run a long, long way. And anybody who got in front of them, who tried to stop them or even slow them down – anybody like that was going to get mowed under. That's just how it was.

The rear doors of the van opened, and the boys jumped out, grabbing their signs as they went. Kyle was the last one. He stepped onto the street, the night seeming to glow around him. It was cold out – even snowing a little – but Kyle was too ramped to feel it. The street was narrow, with four-story tenements crowding it on either side. All of the neon storefront signs were in Chinese, tangles of meaningless gibberish – impossible to read, impossible to understand.

Was this still America? You bet it was. And people spoke English here.

The vans were parked in a line. Big damn white boys in black shirts were everywhere, a bouncing, writhing mass of them. They were an invasion force, like Vikings on a coastal raid. They wielded their signs like battle-axes. Their blood was up.

A crowd of tiny, startled Asians looked on in... what?

Shock? Horror? Fear?

Oh yes, all of these.

The first chant began, a little tame for Kyle's taste, but it would do for a start.

"America... is ours!"

The boys found their voices and the volume jumped a notch.

"AMERICA... IS OURS!"

Kyle flexed his arms. He flexed his upper back, and his round shoulders, and his legs. This was a rally, all right, and that's what he had told his men. But he hoped it became more than that. He'd been holding his anger back for what felt like a long time.

Rallies were good, but he really just wanted to crack some heads.

Within two minutes, he got his wish. As the line of marchers moved down the street, maybe fifty feet ahead of him, some shoving started.

A Stormer took a Chinese man by both shoulders and pushed him into a display of pocketbooks. The Chinese man fell across the display, which collapsed instantly. Two more Chinese men jumped on the Stormer. Suddenly Kyle was running. He dropped his sign and burst through the crowd.

He punched a Chinese to the ground, then waded into a group of them, swinging hard. His fists crunched bone.

And there was only more, he knew, to come.

CHAPTER NINE

9:15 p.m.

Ocean City, Maryland

“Not looking too good there,” Luke said.

The elevator was all carpeting and glass walls. A long double line of buttons ran along a metal panel. He caught sight of his reflection in the concave security mirror in an upper corner. It was a strange, distorted, funhouse view of him, totally at odds with the reflection on the glass walls. The normal glass showed a tall man in early middle-age, very fit, deep crow’s feet around the eyes and the beginnings of gray in his short blond hair. His eyes seemed ancient.

Staring into them, he could suddenly see himself as an old, old man, lonely and afraid. He was alone in this world – more alone than he had ever been. It had somehow taken him two full years to realize that. His wife was dead. His parents were long gone. His boy was hardened against him. There was no one in his life.

A little while ago, in the car, just before he stepped into this elevator, he had dug out Gunner’s old cell phone number. He felt certain that Gunner still had that number. The boy would have kept the same number even after moving in with grandparents, even after getting the best new iPhone available. Luke felt sure of it – Gunner kept his old number because he wanted more than anything to hear from his father.

Luke had sent a simple text message to the old number.

Gunner, I love you.

Then he had waited. And waited. Nothing. The message had gone into the void, and nothing had returned. Luke didn’t even know if it was the right number.

How had it come to this?

He didn’t have time to ponder the answer. The elevator opened directly into the foyer of the apartment. There was no hallway. There were no other doors except the double doors in front of him.

The doors opened and Mark Swann stood there.

Luke soaked in the sight of him. Tall and thin, with long sandy hair and round John Lennon glasses. His hair was pulled into a ponytail. He had aged in two years. He was heavier than before, mostly around the midsection. His face and neck seemed thicker. His T-shirt had the words SEX PISTOLS across the front in letters that could have been used to write a ransom note. He wore blue jeans, with yellow-and-black checkerboard Converse All-Star sneakers on his feet.

Swann smiled, but Luke could easily see the strain in it. Swann wasn’t happy to see him. He looked like he had eaten a bad fish.

“Luke Stone,” he said. “Come on in.”

Luke remembered the apartment. It was big and hyper-modern. There were two floors, open concept, with a ceiling twenty feet above their heads. A steel and cable staircase went up to the second floor, where it connected with a catwalk. There was a living room here with a large white sectional couch. There had been an abstract painting behind the couch last time – crazy, angry red and black splotches five feet across – Luke couldn’t quite remember what it looked like. In any event, it was gone now.

The two men shook hands, then hugged awkwardly.

“Albert Helu?” Luke said, using the name of the Swann alias who owned the apartment.

Swann shrugged. “If you like. You can call me Al. That’s what everyone around here calls me. Can I get you a beer?”

“Sure. Thank you.”

Swann disappeared through a swinging door into the kitchen.

To Luke's right, he could see Swann's command center. Very little had changed. A glass partition divided it from the rest of the apartment. A big leather chair sat at a desk with a bank of tower hard drives on the floor beneath it, and three flat-panel screens on top of it. Wires ran all over the floor like snakes.

On the far wall, across from the sofa, was a giant flat-panel TV set, maybe half the size of a movie theater screen. The sound was muted. On the screen, about a dozen police vans and cars were parked on a city street, lights flashing in the dark. Fifty cops stood in a line. Yellow police tape extended in several places. A large crowd of people stood behind the tape, stretching down the block and away from the scene.

LIVE the caption below the scene read. *CHINATOWN, NEW YORK CITY*

Swann came back with two bottles of beer. Instantly, Luke knew why Swann was getting heavier. He was spending a lot of time drinking beer.

Swann gestured at the TV. "Did you hear about that?" he said.

Luke shook his head. "No. What is it?"

"About forty-five minutes ago a bunch of neo-Nazis tried to do some kind of group march through the middle of Chinatown in New York. Gathering Storm, ever heard of them?"

"Swann, what if I told you I've spent the past two years living mostly in tents?"

"Then I'd say you've never heard of Gathering Storm. Anyway, they're actually a nonprofit organization, dedicated to preserving and promoting cultural... what? Whiteness, I suppose. American Europeanism? You know. They want to make America safe for white people. Jefferson Monroe is their major funder – they're basically his modern version of the brownshirts. There are probably half a dozen groups like this now, but I think they're the biggest one."

"What happened?"

Swann shrugged. "What else? They started up beating random people on the street. You've never seen these guys. They're a goon squad. Big guys. They were throwing people around. A couple of people in the neighborhood took offense. They lit the Nazis up with guns. A bunch of people were shot, five dead at last count. Shooters still on the loose. It's what they call a fluid situation."

"The people killed were all Nazis?" Luke said.

"Seems that way."

Luke shrugged. "Well..."

"Right. No big loss."

Luke looked away from the TV. He was having a hard time wrapping his head around what was going on. Susan Hopkins believed the election had been stolen. Her opponent, the incoming President, was funding a neo-Nazi group, which had just sparked a mini race war in New York City. Was this how things were done now? When had everything changed? Luke had been gone a long time, apparently.

"What have you been up to, Swann?"

Swann sat on the big white couch. He gestured at a seat across from him. Luke took it. It had the tangible benefit of facing away from the TV. From his spot, he could look out the darkened glass doors to Swann's roof deck. The hot tub gave off a pale blue neon light. Otherwise, it was mostly dark out there. Luke had slept on the deck once upon a time. He knew that in daylight hours, it gave a panoramic view of the Atlantic Ocean.

"Not much," Swann said. "Nothing, to be honest."

"Nothing?"

Swann seemed to think about it for a moment. "You're looking at it. I'm out on disability. When we got back from Syria, I just never could... go back to work. I tried a couple of times. But intelligence is a nasty business. I never minded it when it was other people getting hurt. But after Syria? I got panic attacks. The severed heads, you know? For a while, I was seeing them all the time. It was bad. It was too much."

“I’m sorry,” Luke said.

“I am, too. Believe me. And it’s not over. I’m a little bit of a recluse now. I keep my old apartment in DC, but I mostly live up here now. It’s safe. Nobody can get in here if I don’t want them to.”

Stone thought about that for a second, but said nothing. It was true enough, as far as it went. The vast majority of people couldn’t get in here. Honest, mainstream people. Nice people. But bad people? Killers? Black operatives? They’d get in here if they wanted to.

“I rarely go out,” Swann said. “I order my groceries on the internet. I let the kid into the building from here, and monitor him coming up in the elevator. Watch him on the closed-circuit TV. I leave a tip for him in the hallway, he leaves the grocery bags at the door, and I watch him go back down. Then I go out in the hall and get my food. It’s a little pathetic, I know that.”

Luke said nothing. It was sad that Swann had been reduced to this, but Luke wouldn’t call it pathetic. It happened. Maybe he could help Swann, get him back out into the world again, but maybe not. Either way, it would take a lot of work, and time, and Swann would have to want it. Sometimes psychological trauma like this never really healed. Swann was a prisoner of ISIS, about to be beheaded, when Luke and Ed Newsam barged in. He had been beaten and mock-executed before they got there.

A silence settled between them, not a comfortable one.

“There was a period of time when I blamed you for what happened to me.”

“Okay,” Luke said. That was Swann’s truth, and Luke wasn’t about to argue with him about it. But Swann had taken the mission on voluntarily, and Luke and Ed had risked their lives to save him.

“I realize it doesn’t make much sense, and I don’t believe it now, but it took me months of therapy to get to this place. You and Ed have this weird glow around you. It’s like you’re superhuman. Even when you get hurt, it seems like it doesn’t really hurt. People get too close to you, and they begin to think this thing you have also applies to them. But it doesn’t. Regular people get hurt, and they die.”

“Are you in therapy now?”

Swann nodded. “Twice a week. I found a guy who will do it over a video feed. He’s in his office, I’m here. It’s pretty good.”

“What does he tell you?”

Swann smiled. “He says whatever you do, don’t buy a gun. I tell him I live on the twenty-eighth floor with an open balcony. I don’t need a gun. I can die any time I want.”

Luke decided to change the subject. Talking about ways that Swann could commit suicide... it wasn’t cheerful.

“You see Ed much?”

Swann shrugged. “Not in a while. He’s busy with work. He’s a commander with the Hostage Rescue Team. He’s out of the country a lot. We used to see each other more. He’s pretty much the same, though.”

“Do you feel up for doing some work?” Luke said.

“I don’t know,” Swann said. “I think that would depend on what it was. The demands, what I would have to do. I also don’t want to jeopardize my disability. Are you paying under the table?”

“I’m working for the President,” Luke said. “Susan Hopkins.”

“That’s cute. What does she need you for?”

“She thinks the election was stolen.”

Swann nodded. “I heard that. The news cycles zip by at the speed of light these days, but that’s a story with legs. She doesn’t want to step down. So where do you fit in? And more importantly, where would I fit in?”

“Well, she’s probably going to want some intel gathering from us. I imagine she wants to do some kind of takedown on these guys. I don’t have any details right now.”

“Can I work from here?” Swann said.

“I suppose. Why not?”

Luke paused. “But the truth is I’m a little concerned about this conversation. You’re different from before. You know that. I would want to make sure you’ve still got your old chops.”

Swann didn’t seem bothered by that. “Test me any way you like. I’m in here day and night, Luke. What do you think I do with my time? I hack. I’ve got all my old chops, and some new ones. I might even be better than before. And as long as I don’t have to go outside...”

Now Swann paused for a moment. He stared down at the beer in his hands, then looked up at Luke. His eyes were serious.

“I hate Nazis,” he said.

CHAPTER TEN

November 12

8:53 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time

The West Wing

The White House, Washington DC

“There was violence all through the night,” Kat Lopez said. “Kurt has the details, but the worst of it was in Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle.”

“Why wasn’t I told about this?” Susan said.

They walked along the halls of the West Wing toward the Oval Office. Their heels clacked on the marble floor. Susan felt better than she had in a while – well rested from a long night’s sleep. She had eaten breakfast in the Family Kitchen without checking the news once. She was beginning to believe that events were taking a turn for the positive. Until a minute ago.

Kat shrugged. “I wanted you to get some sleep. There was nothing you could do about it in the middle of the night, and I figured today was going to be another hell of a day. Kurt agreed with me.”

“Okay,” Susan said. She supposed she meant it.

A Secret Service man opened the doors for them and they passed into the Oval Office. Kurt Kimball stood there, sleeves rolled up, ready to go. Luke Stone sat in one of the armchairs, in almost the same position he was in the night before.

Stone wore a plain black T-shirt with a leather jacket, jeans, and fancy leather boots. He looked fresher, less distant, more in the here and now than yesterday. His eyes were alive. Stone was a space cowboy, Susan decided. Sometimes he was just gone, out in the ether. That’s where he went when he disappeared. But now he was back.

“Hi, Kurt,” Susan said.

Kurt turned to her. “Susan. Good morning.”

“Nice boots, Agent Stone.”

Stone pulled his jeans leg up a couple of inches to reveal more of the boot for her. “Ferragamo,” he said. “My wife gave them to me once upon a time. They have sentimental value.”

“I’m sorry about your wife.”

Stone nodded. “Thank you.”

An awkward pause settled in. If she could, part of Susan – the emotional part, you might even call it the female part – would spend the next twenty minutes asking Stone about his wife, his relationship with her, how he had processed her death, and what he was doing to take care of himself. But Susan didn’t have that kind of time right now. The hard-headed, practical part of her – would she call that her masculine part? – pushed on with today’s agenda.

“Okay, Kurt, what do you have for me?”

Kurt indicated the TV screen. “Events have been moving fast. No surprise there. We had a mass shooting in New York City’s Chinatown last night. A large group of operatives from Gathering Storm emerged out of a convoy of black vans at around eight thirty p.m., and went on a march south from Canal Street. It was a provocation, of course. Within minutes, they were engaged in fistfights with neighborhood residents.”

“Gathering Storm, huh?” Gathering Storm was one of the Monroe-funded organizations that made Susan sick to her stomach. She often wondered exactly what it was these people thought they were doing. Of course, up until now the violence had been almost entirely threats made over the internet. Now it was real.

Kurt nodded. “Yes. They seem to recruit their activists based on size. The fist fights were completely one-sided for several minutes, until two contract killers from the Hong Kong Triads – apparently in New York on a murder assignment – opened up with Uzi submachine guns. The latest

tally is thirty-six wounded, including a dozen Chinese, likely shot by accident, and seven dead, all of whom were members of Gathering Storm. Another three members are expected to die.”

Susan wasn't sure what to say to all this. Good? That came to mind.

“The Triad members?”

“In NYPD custody, on multiple murder, attempted murder, and weapons charges. They have court-appointed translators, and last I heard a legal team is en route from Hong Kong. The Triads are well funded, to put it mildly, and the expectation is the lawyers will try to build a case for self-defense on the murders, and plead out the weapons.”

“What do you think of that approach?” Susan said.

Kurt smiled and shook his head. “New York doesn't have the death penalty. That's about the only thing those guys have going for them right now.”

“How about if I pardon them and send them home with medals?”

“I think we've got enough problems.”

“Tell me more,” she said.

“Well, once the news came out about New York, it seems the gloves came off. Groups of young men started entering Boston's Chinatown around ten p.m. and attacking people on the street. They seemed to be men who were drinking in nearby bars, as the four men arrested were all drunk.”

“Four men were arrested? You said groups – ”

“Yes. It appears the Boston police were somewhat more lenient than one might hope, and let the majority of the offenders go with a simple warning.”

“What else?”

“A group from the Oakland branch of the motorcycle gang Nazi Lowriders entered the Chinatown in San Francisco and attacked people on the streets with sawed off pool cues and billy clubs. More than forty of them were arrested. Two of the victims in those attacks are in critical condition at area hospitals.”

Susan sighed and shook her head. “Great. Anything else?”

“Yes. Probably the most exciting news. Jefferson Monroe is scheduled to speak at a rally of his followers this morning, perhaps to address the violence last night, perhaps to call for you to concede again. No one is quite sure what his script is going to be. The best part is where the rally is going to take place.”

Susan didn't enjoy it when Kurt was being coy.

“Okay, Kurt. Out with it. Where is that?”

“Lafayette Park. Directly across the street from us.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

9:21 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Lafayette Park, Washington DC

It was a beautiful thing to witness.

They called it the People's Park, and today the people were all here.

Not the ordinary denizens of this park, where generation after generation of the rabble, the rabble-rousers, and the radicals – the unwashed, the losers of life – would camp out and protest the policies of one President after another.

No. Not those people.

These people were *his* people. A sea of people – thousands of them, tens of thousands – who last night had passed the word across social media that their man was speaking here today. It was a stealth move, a knife in the back, the kind of move Gerry O'Brien excelled at. He had obtained the permit for this gathering from the city just before close of business yesterday afternoon, and the news of it had spread like wildfire overnight, the flames fanned by hurricane-force winds.

Now the people were all here, wearing their giant Abe Lincoln hats and carrying their signs – handmade signs, official signs from the campaign, professionally made signs from the dozens of organizations that had supported the campaign. Most of the people were dressed warmly in heavy coats and hats against the unseasonable chill.

Jefferson Monroe gazed out from the makeshift stage at that teeming mass of humanity – it was like a rock and roll festival out there – and knew he was born for just this moment. Seventy-four years, and many, many victories: from his earliest days as a teenage moonshiner in the backwoods of Appalachia, through his time as an angry young strikebreaker, an ambitious company executive, and eventually a major shareholder and captain of the coal industry.

Later, he became a senator from West Virginia and conservative political kingmaker heavily funded by the same coal companies he once worked for. And now... President-elect of the United States. A lifetime of striving, long decades of climbing up from the bottom, clawing his way, and suddenly, quite by surprise (an outcome no one expected, not even him), he was the most powerful man on Earth.

He was here to force the sitting President to leave the White House early, and allow him to enter. It was as audacious as anything he had ever attempted. Past the crowds and across the wide thoroughfare, he could see the White House in the distance, rising on a green knoll. Could she see him from there? Was she watching?

God, he hoped so.

He turned away from the crowd, just for a moment. Behind him on the stage was a crowd of people. O'Brien was there, the mastermind of this campaign, the dark lord of the white supremacists, a man at least as driven as Monroe was himself. Even now, he was barking something into a cell phone.

"I want that bird," Gerry the Shark seemed to be saying. But how could that be right? *I want that bird?* What a strange thing to say! At a moment like this?

"I want it, okay? I want it to land just like we talked about. Tell me you can do that. Okay? Good. When?"

Monroe shrugged it off. Dealing with Gerry was more than just a wild ride – it was a lesson in surrealism. The President-elect decided to ignore his closest advisor for the time being. Instead, he spoke to the other people on stage.

"Are you seeing this?" he said, as he covered the microphone with his hand and indicated the massive crowd. "Are you *seeing* this?"

"It is the best thing I've ever seen," a young aide said.

Behind him, clapping began in the crowd – not random, but rhythmic, thousands of hands clapping at once – CLAP, CLAP, CLAP, CLAP...

A chant was about to go up. This is how it started, with clapping, and in some cases stomping. And here it came, the voices rising.

“U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!”

It was a good one, a good one to start on.

Monroe took his hand from the microphone and gripped the stand instead. He raised a hand, quieting the chant within seconds. It was like he simply turned down the sound on a machine – a TV, or a radio. But it wasn't a machine, it was thousands and thousands of people, and he controlled them, effortlessly, with a gesture. Not for the first time, he marveled at that power, a power that he had. Like a superhero.

Or a god.

“How's that global warming treating you?” he said, his voice echoing over the multitudes. Laughter and cheers rippled through the crowd. Personally, Monroe knew from climate scientists employed by his companies that global warming was a fact of life, and would be a serious issue a century from now, or sooner, perhaps even a threat to civilization itself. As President, he might quietly look for ways to implement policies that lessened the threat somewhat, without harming industry profits. In the meantime, his companies were gradually increasing investment in the renewable energy fields – the solar, wind, and geothermal technologies that were the future.

But his people didn't want to hear any of that. They wanted to hear that global warming was a hoax, perpetrated in large part by the Chinese. So that's what Monroe would tell them. Give the people what they want. And anyway, it was cold out today, an unseasonably cold day in early November, and that was evidence enough – there couldn't be any such thing as global warming.

“Today is our day, did you know that?”

The crowd greeted that idea with a roar of approval.

“We came from nothing, you and I did. Okay? And we came from nowhere. We didn't grow up in fancy upscale Manhattan or San Francisco or Boston penthouses. We didn't go to special private schools for special people. We don't sip lattes and read the *New York Times*. We don't know that world. We don't want to know that world. You and I, we've worked hard all our lives, and we've earned everything we have, and everything we will ever have. And today is our day.”

Their cheering was an eruption – an earthquake – of sound. It seemed like some great beast was beneath the surface of the Earth, sleeping dormant for centuries, and now it would rend the ground and burst forth in a frenzy of violence.

“Today is the day we are going to remove one of the most corrupt administrations in American history. Yes, I know, I know. She said she's not leaving, but I tell you what. It's not going to last. She's leaving, all right, and a lot sooner than anyone thinks. It's going to happen a lot sooner than *she* thinks, that's for sure.”

The cheering went on and on. He waited for the crowd to die down. Monroe's people hated Susan Hopkins. They hated her, and everything she stood for. She was rich, she was beautiful, she was spoiled – she had never lacked for anything in her life. She was a woman in a job always done by men.

She was a friend to immigrants, and to the Chinese, whose cheap labor practices had destroyed the American way of life. She was a hedonist, a former jet-setter, and she seemed to confirm everything heartland people suspected about the celebrity class. Her husband was gay, for the love of God! He had been born in France. Could there be anything more un-American than a gay Frenchman?

Susan Hopkins was a monster to these people. In the far reaches of internet conspiracy websites, there were even those who claimed that she and her husband were murderers, and worse than murderers. They were devil worshippers. They belonged to a Satanic cult of the mega-wealthy who stole and sacrificed children.

Well, today Monroe would give his people the murderer part. He wished he could be there inside the Oval Office and see her face when this news broke.

The crowd had quieted again. They were waiting for him now.

“I want you to listen to me for a minute,” he said. “Because what I’m about to tell you is a little bit complicated, and it’s not easy on the ears. But I’m going to tell it because you have to know it. You, the American people, the true patriots, deserve to know. It’s very important. Our future is at stake.”

He had them. They were ready now. Here it came. The Hail Mary pass. The bomb. Jefferson Monroe geared himself up and launched it.

“Five days before election day, a man turned up dead near the Tidal Basin right here in Washington, DC.”

His people had gone silent. A dead man? This was something new. It was not the typical Jefferson Monroe rally topic. It seemed that thousands of pairs of eyes were riveted to him. In fact, that was indeed the case. *Give us something*, those big hollow eyes seemed to say. *Give us the meat*.

“At first glance, it seemed like the man had committed suicide. He was shot in the head, the gun was found near his body, and his fingerprints were on the gun. It didn’t make much impact in the news at the time – people die every day, and often enough, they take their own lives. But I knew, okay, folks? I knew that this man didn’t kill himself.”

The eyes watched him. Thousands and thousands of eyes.

“How did I know that?”

No one said a word. Jefferson Monroe had never seen such a large group of people so quiet in his entire life. They sensed something big was coming, and that he was the one bringing it.

“I knew he didn’t commit suicide because I knew this man personally. I’d almost say he was a friend of mine. His name was Patrick Norman.”

Jefferson was no stranger to telling big lies. Even so, and unlike many politicians, he felt a certain twinge when he did it. It wasn’t guilt. It was the sense that somewhere out there, someone knew the truth, and that person would work tirelessly to bring the truth to light. In fact, it wasn’t even somewhere out there – at least three people standing behind him on the stage knew the facts. There were probably a dozen others in the organization. They knew that Jeff Monroe had never once spoken to Patrick Norman.

He pressed on.

“Patrick Norman was not suicidal – far from it. On the contrary, he was one of the best and most successful private investigators in the United States, and he made a lot of money. I know what he made because I was paying him. He was working for my campaign at the time of his death.

“Campaigning is a dirty business, folks. I’ll be the first to tell you that. Sometimes you do things you’re not proud of to get a leg up on your opponent. And I hired Patrick to look into corruption in the Hopkins administration, and in the business dealings of the soon-to-be *former* President’s husband, Pierre Michaud. Okay? Do you see where this is going?”

A ripple of assent, a loud murmur, went through the crowd like a rolling wave.

“Patrick called me on the phone a couple of days before he died, and he said, ‘Jeff, I’ve got the dirt you’re looking for. I just need to follow up on a couple of last leads. But this thing I have – the bad things she’s done – is going to blow this election wide open.’”

This was a lie stacked on top of a lie. Norman never called him. He never called him Jeff – he never called him at all. He had no dirt on Susan Hopkins, even after nearly a year of looking. He had determined that she was probably squeaky clean, or if not, the dirt was buried so deep that no one would ever find it.

“What Patrick suggested to me was that Hopkins and her husband accepted bribes from foreign leaders, including Third World dictators, in exchange for favorable treatment from the United States government. He also suggested that there was a quid pro quo going on in support of Pierre Michaud’s sham charities. If the dictators would make Michaud look good by letting him build his fake water

systems – water systems that help no one, folks! – the USA would sell them weapon systems. This is shocking stuff. And folks, that was the last I ever heard from Patrick Norman. He had the dirt on Susan Hopkins. Then he died, apparently by his own hand.”

Now a ripple of boos went through the crowd.

“But it wasn’t by his own hand, right? Yesterday afternoon, the Washington, DC, medical examiner’s office released their findings. Patrick Norman did not fire the gun that killed him. And he had marks on his body consistent with a struggle. All indications are that someone killed him and made it look like a suicide.”

He paused and let the moment draw its breath. These were the true parts, and the parts that were especially damning.

“Five days before the election, Patrick Norman, the man with the dirt on Susan Hopkins, was murdered.”

The crowd exploded into a fit of ecstasy. This was what they wanted, all they had ever wanted – something that seemed to confirm everything that they just knew about Susan Hopkins. She was corrupt to her core, and she would have someone killed to cover her trail of deception.

As the crowd cheered, the cheer began to morph into something, the chant that had emerged late in the campaign. It was the most dangerous chant of all, one that Gerry the Shark had released into the public sphere through his Gathering Storm goon squad.

“KICK...HER...OUT!.. KICK...HER...OUT!”

Then a strange and wonderful thing happened.

Even as his people chanted violence, a white dove flew down from the sky, hovered about Jefferson Monroe for a moment, then alighted onto the right shoulder of his wool coat. It flapped its wings a couple of times, then settled down and relaxed. Now he had a dove on his shoulder. The crowd erupted.

It was magic. More than that, it was a sign. A sign from God.

He moved carefully, trying not to alarm the bird.

I want that bird, Gerry the Shark had shouted into the telephone.

Monroe raised his left arm, trying to quiet the crowd. It worked, sort of.

“This is a dove of peace,” he said. “And this is how we’re going to do it, folks. Peacefully, through the rule of law. Through the enforcement of the laws of the United States. Through the peaceful transfer of power which has been one of our great traditions since the earliest days of the Republic.

“Because we are a nation of laws, Susan Hopkins must vacate the office of President this very day, and leave the White House. The Washington, DC, metro police and the medical examiner have done their jobs – they have determined that Patrick Norman did not kill himself. And now I call on the Justice Department and the FBI to do their jobs – and investigate President Hopkins for murder.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

11:45 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time

The Situation Room

The White House, Washington DC

“Is it a warrant for my arrest?” Susan Hopkins said. “Is that what they’ve issued?”

Kurt Kimball turned the sound down on the video monitor. They had just watched Jefferson Monroe’s speech again – Luke had seen it three times now.

Although there were other festivities at Monroe’s rally earlier this morning, it didn’t matter what else came after that. A minor country music star had taken the stage and tried to entertain the crowd with a song about America, but within seconds people were already drifting away.

They hadn’t come for music – they had come for a public lynching, which was pretty close to what they had gotten.

Now Luke glanced around the Situation Room, watching the reactions. It was a packed house, a gathering of the tribes. People from the election campaign, Secret Service, Susan’s people, the Vice President’s people, some people from the Democratic Party. Luke didn’t see a lot of fight in the eyes of these people. Some of them were obviously monitoring the proceedings in search of a good time to jump ship before it sank to the bottom of the ocean.

Scenes like this were not Luke’s normal environment. He felt out of place, and even more than that. He recognized that a group of people were trying to make difficult decisions, but he didn’t have a lot of patience for the process. His typical response to a problem had always been to think of something, then act on it. Meanwhile, Kurt Kimball seemed confused. Kat Lopez seemed stricken. Only Susan seemed calm.

Luke watched Susan closely, looking for signs of collapse. It was a habit he had picked up in war zones, especially during downtime between battles – he would become acutely aware of how much the people around him had left in the tank. Stress took its toll, and people were worn down by it. Sometimes it happened gradually, and sometimes it happened instantly. But either way, there came a time when all but the most hardcore fighters would fold under pressure. Then they would cease to function.

But Susan didn’t seem to have reached that place yet. Her voice was steady. Her eyes were hard and unflinching. She was in a bad place, but she was still fighting. Luke was glad about that. It would make it easier to fight alongside her.

Kurt, at the front of the room near the big projection screen, shook his perfectly bald head. “No. You are a person of interest in the case, but not a suspect. The Washington, DC, Metro Police, specifically the Homicide Division, have simply made a request for an interview. They would like you to come in to their headquarters. You would have your legal counsel with you, and available at all times. That said, if you grant them the interview, you could become a suspect during the course of it. At which point, you could be arrested.”

Kurt glanced at the White House legal counsel, a straight-laced man in a three-piece suit, and a mop of sandy hair on top of his head. He had two aides with him.

“Would you say that’s right, Howard?” Kurt said.

Howard nodded. “I would not grant them an interview at this time, and certainly not an in-person interview. Not here, and under no circumstances at one of their facilities. You could go in and have a hard time getting out again, especially in the current climate. If they want to do an interview, it should be over the telephone or maybe a video conference. You’re busy, Susan. You’re President of the United States. You want to meet your responsibilities in this case, but you also have a lot of other things to do.”

“Doesn’t that make Susan look guilty?” a young guy in a blue suit and a crew cut said. He sat directly across the conference table from Luke. He looked like he was nineteen years old – in the sense that a lot of nineteen-year-olds still look like they are twelve. “I mean, we have nothing to hide here. I’m very confident of that.”

“Agent Stone,” Susan said. “Do you know my campaign manager, Tim Rutledge?”

Luke shook his head. “Haven’t had the pleasure.”

They reached across the table and shook hands. Rutledge had a firm grip, overly firm, like he had read in a book somewhere that a firm grip was important.

Rutledge looked at Luke. “And what is your role here, Agent Stone?”

Luke stared at him. He figured the best way to answer was honestly.

“I don’t know.”

“Agent Stone is a special operative. He has saved my life on more than one occasion, as well as my daughter’s life. He’s probably saved everyone in this room’s life at one point or another.”

“Who do you work for?” Rutledge said.

Luke shrugged. “I work for the President.” He didn’t see any need to go into his past, the Special Response Team, Delta Force, any of it. If this guy wanted to know that stuff, he could find it all out. The truth was, Luke felt strangely disconnected from that person, the person he had once been. He wasn’t sure what good he could do here.

“Well, I work for the President, too,” Rutledge said. “And I can tell you that these allegations, or whatever they are, are not true. Not one word of it. Susan had nothing to do with this man’s murder, nor did the campaign, nor did Pierre. There’s been no corruption. There’s been no pay to play with Pierre’s charities. I know this because we dug deep at the start of the campaign to see where the vulnerabilities were, to find any skeletons. Financially, there were basically none. I know there have been some personal issues, and it’s possible they played a role in the outcome of the election, but Pierre is about the squeakiest clean businessman I’ve ever run across.”

“Did you know the dead man at all?” Kurt said.

Rutledge shrugged. “Know him? No. I knew of him. I never met him or spoke to him. Pierre’s security director alerted the campaign to the guy’s existence probably nine months ago. There had been a number of attempted hacks into company databases, all leading back to Norman’s investigation agency. Pretty amateurish stuff. From there, Pierre’s people determined that Norman was working for Monroe, but no one worried about it too much. And we certainly weren’t going to murder him. As I indicated, there was nothing for him to find. You have to remember that all of this was in the context of last summer, when we all knew the people were never going to vote in a crazy person like Jefferson Monroe as President of the United States.”

Three people over from Rutledge, a man raised his hand. He was a weak-looking middle-aged man with thinning hair. He had a long nose and no chin to speak of. His body was thin and utterly without muscle tone. He wore an ill-fitting gray suit that he seemed to swim inside of. But he had hard, hard eyes. Here was one person in the room who was definitely not afraid.

Oddly, he wore a *Hello, my name is* sticker on the front of his suit. It said, in thick scribbled black magic marker, *Brent Staples*.

Luke knew the name. He was an old-school campaign strategist and public relations man. Luke thought he and Susan had had a falling out at one point, but they must have patched things up for the campaign. A lot of good that had done Susan.

“I hate to say this,” he said, and Luke could tell he actually relished saying it, whatever came next. “But Jefferson Monroe is looking less and less crazy, while the people in this room are looking more and more so.”

“What are you trying to say, Brent?” Susan said.

“I’m saying that you’re out on a limb again, Susan. You are all by yourself in a very awkward place. I’m telling you that you are becoming isolated from the American people. From a regular

person's perspective, you lost the election, and that hurts. There might have even been some malfeasance on your opponent's part. But nobody knows if that's really true, and if it is true, nobody knows what kind of impact it had on the outcome. Meanwhile, you're saying you won't step down. Also, a man has been murdered who was investigating you. And it seems you're leaning toward saying you won't give the police an interview. My question to you is: who's starting to look like the criminal here? Who is starting to look like the crazy person?"

Kat Lopez stood in the corner of the room. She shook her head and glared at Brent Staples. "Brent, that's out of line. You know Susan didn't murder anyone. You know that this is a dog-and-pony show dreamed up by Monroe and his hitman Gerry O'Brien."

"I'm telling you what it looks like," Staples said. "Not what it is. I don't know what it is, and that doesn't really matter anyway. What it looks like is everything."

He gazed around the room, hard eyes taking everyone in, daring them to tell him otherwise.

Young Tim Rutledge took up the challenge. "It looks to me like they murdered the investigator so they could pin it on Susan," he said. "It looks to me like they stole the election through voter fraud and by tampering with the machinery. That's what it looks like to me."

Luke finally decided to chime in with something. Now he realized what was wrong with this entire meeting, and since he did, he might as well point it out. Maybe it could help them.

"It seems to me," he said slowly, "that you need to take back the initiative."

Throughout the room, all eyes slowly turned to him.

"Think of this as combat, a battle. They have you on the run. They have you in disarray. They do something, and you react. By the time you react, they're already doing something else. They are on the attack, and you are in a disorganized retreat. You have to come up with some way to attack them, set them on their back foot, and retake the initiative."

"Like what?" Brent Staples said.

Luke shrugged. "I don't know. Isn't that your job?"

For several minutes, Kurt Kimball had been huddled in a corner with two of his aides. Something had clearly distracted him. Now he turned back to the room.

"I like your idea, Stone. But it's going to be hard to retake the initiative at this moment."

Stone raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Why's that?"

"We just learned that at least a hundred West Virginia state troopers, and Wheeling metropolitan police, are en route to Washington in a long convoy. They intend to come directly here to the White House, take Susan into custody, and bring her to the DC Metropolitan police headquarters themselves."

"They have no jurisdiction," the White House counsel, Howard, said. "Have they lost their minds?"

"It seems that everyone has lost their minds today," Kurt said. "And they have a claim to jurisdiction, however slight."

"What is it?"

"Both police forces, along with a dozen others from nearby states, are routinely deputized as auxiliary Washington, DC, cops to provide overflow security for the Presidential inauguration events every four years. They claim that renders them permanent deputies."

Howard shook his head. "It won't hold up in court. It's silly."

Kurt put his hands in the air, as if Howard had pulled a gun on him. "Whether it will hold up or not, they're on their way here. Apparently, they think they're going to walk in here, take Susan, and walk back out of here with her."

There was a long pause. No one in the room spoke. The silence spun out as each face looked from one to the other.

"They'll be here in thirty minutes," Kurt said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

12:14 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Outside the White House

Washington DC

“No one gets inside,” the tall man said into his walkie-talkie. “Are we clear? I want personnel centered at the gatehouse, but I also want eyes in the sky watching every possible point of entry. Shooters on the roof.”

“Roger that,” a voice squawked from the handset.

“Tell those shooters use of deadly force is green light. Repeat, green light on deadly force, but only if necessary.”

“On whose authority?”

“Mine,” the man said. “My authority.”

“Copy,” the voice said.

The tall man’s name was Charles “Chuck” Berg.

He was forty years old, and had been in the Secret Service for nearly fifteen years. He had been the head of the President’s home security detail for more than two years. It had come about by accident, the result of a disaster. He had been on her personal security detail the evening of the Mount Weather attack, when she was the Vice President. He had almost certainly saved her life. Everyone else on the team had been killed.

He had changed that night. He only saw it in retrospect. He had already been thirty-seven years old, in a job with a high level of responsibility, and married with two children – but in a sense, that was the night he became a man. He became who he was supposed to be. Before then? He was just a big kid with a job that let him carry a gun.

Susan trusted him after that night. And he trusted her. More than that – he felt protective of her – and not just because it was his job to feel that way. He was younger than her by a decade, and yet he felt almost like he was her big brother.

Survival – saving someone’s life – is an intimate thing.

He knew there was nothing to these corruption charges, or this murder charge. And he’d be dipped if he was going to allow anyone in to take the President of the United States into custody – especially not a bunch of yahoos wielding a fake bench warrant from far outside any reasonable claim to jurisdiction.

He had just done a perimeter check on foot. He was moving up the driveway, back toward the White House. Just ahead of him, a dozen heavily armed men in business suits moved briskly along the road. It was a sunny day, and cold. The shadows of the men on the ground showed sharp, high-powered rifles and shotguns poking from their sides.

The guardhouse was just up ahead. It was protected by concrete barriers. There was both a STOP sign and a DO NOT ENTER sign on the fence. More men in suits stood by the entrance. The body language of the men was alert, tense. They had the overstuffed look of men wearing bullet-proof vests or armor under their clothes.

Construction vehicles were setting down taller, thicker, and heavier barriers in front of the existing ones. They were just putting the finishing touches on the barriers now. The new barriers created a narrow chute, which was also a Byzantine maze of sharp right and left turns. It would force any vehicle to slow to a crawl. Wider vehicles, like trucks or Humvees, wouldn’t be able to pass through it at all.

NOTICE, a sign read. RESTRICTED AREA. 100 % ID CHECK.

There weren’t going to be any ID checks today. No one was going in or out.

In the near distance, perhaps two hundred yards away, men in black uniforms moved into position on the roof of the White House. Those guys were the real deal, Berg knew. The shooters. Secret Service snipers, any one of whom could easily put a bullet through his heart from this distance.

A Black Hawk helicopter took off from a helipad behind a copse of trees on the White House grounds. It headed east, then banked lazily to the north. Snipers lounged in the open bay doors.

This was just the visible defense. There were more than a hundred men and women guarding the perimeter of the White House grounds, including military units. No inch of the fencing or the walls around the property was not under surveillance at this moment. In addition to the circling Black Hawks, there were three Apache helicopter gunships hovering out over the Potomac River. Those Apaches could take out the entire approaching line of police vehicles in seconds.

It was the mismatch of all mismatches. The NBA champions versus the local junior high school B team.

Chuck pulled out his cell phone. He had this crazy sheriff from Wheeling, West Virginia, on speed dial. Was the man on a suicide mission? Chuck was about to find out.

The phone rang three times.

“Paxton,” the man said. His deep, gravelly voice had a slight drawl to it. You wouldn’t necessarily call it Southern. You might say it was Appalachian hillbilly.

Chuck pictured him in his mind. He had requested a research brief on the sheriff when he first heard they were coming. Bobby Paxton was a broad man in his fifties, an ex-Marine who still sported a flattop haircut. He was known as a no-nonsense, law and order type. More than that – for years, his department had been dogged by police brutality complaints, especially against young black males in custody.

Paxton himself was also on the record as flirting with any number of cockamamie conspiracy theories, up to and including the idea that elements of the federal government were cooperating with a race of seven-foot-tall aliens from outer space, who had given the American military advanced technologies like particle beam weaponry and anti-gravity flying machines.

It was possible that Paxton was insane. And if so, this could turn into a long day.

“Sheriff,” Chuck said. “Where are you now?”

“We are two minutes from your location. You should get a visual on us shortly.”

“Sir, I’ve said this to you before, and I’m going to say it one last time. Any message you have for the President is one I will accept from you at the front gate. Neither you, nor any of your personnel, will enter the White House grounds. There is no way – a zero percent chance – that you will take the President into custody today. You have no jurisdiction on federal property, nor within the city of Washington – ”

“We do have jurisdiction,” Paxton said. “My entire force has been – ”

Chuck continued without missing a beat. “And the department with jurisdiction, the Washington, DC, Metro Police, has declined to enforce the warrant that you carry.”

But Paxton didn’t stop either. “...deputized as auxiliary police officers of the city of Washington, DC.”

“Sir, you are on a fool’s errand, and a dangerous one at that. I’m concerned that someone is going to get hurt out here today. And I can tell you that it won’t be any of my people.”

“Son,” Paxton said, “you are on the wrong side of history. If you have any sense, you will step aside and let me do my job. We are coming in, regardless of what you decide.”

Chuck Berg’s shoulders slumped. He sighed heavily. This was how the man was going to ride this? Straight into a brick wall? So be it.

“Sheriff, we have helicopters in the air. We have marksmen on the roof. You are already in our crosshairs. You must know that. Please also know that five minutes ago, I authorized the use of deadly force to maintain the integrity of the security zone around the White House and its grounds. I urge you to leave your paperwork with me at the guardhouse. If you, or any of your men, attempt

to go any further than that, you will be responsible for the consequences. If you, or any of your men, draw a weapon, you will also – ”

“And you will be a murderer shoring up the dying rule of a despot,” Paxton said. “Is that the legacy you want? Is that how your children and grandchildren will remember you?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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